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April N. Baca
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Recommended Citation

Baca, April N., "Beyond the Blinds: On Power and Subversion" (2015). *Art 525 Conference Papers*. Paper 1.
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Beyond the Blinds:
On Power and Subversion

April N. Baca

Art 525

May 25th, 2015

Each culture operates with a particular set of ideologies that through the course of time have become embedded and ever-present to those residing within its parameters. Simultaneously, these belief systems cannot help but be anything other than apparent to those living outside of them. This becomes obvious when the seemingly illogical and sometimes ludicrous traditions of the past are examined. Interestingly, what remains apparent through this exercise is that our own current ideologies and/or knowledge structure is somehow seen as correct and as a progression from the political “incorrectness” of those things. Those employing the Western political vernacular routinely enjoy flexing this preeminence in front of others through constructions of hierarchal language including derogatory terms that seem harmless such as the term Third World. This, however, is false. Prescriptive truths are nonexistent and remain in a constant flux as they collide and adjust according to disparate cultural origins. In response, the discourse of metaphysics has often been a source for contributing to various debates since it consists of the very examination of power structures, relationships, and origins. Through an analysis of Francis Bacon’s critical appropriation of Diego Velazquez’s *Portrait of Innocent X*, 1650, *Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), this paper examines the power structures and subversions that Bacon initiates through painting, revealing a connection among contemporary social constructs and conceptual systems. The distillation of the power of the *Subject* in Bacon’s work remains relative not only to the painting’s own embodiment of theological transgressions, but also to the subversion of an entire structure of power; this includes a body of power encompassing language, the function of knowledge and “truth,” and the technical mechanics and technology of paint itself. The analysis of these conceptual and foundational meanings specific to hierarchal power structures will thus be scrutinized through the appropriation, critique and dissemination of the theoretical vernacular reflected within Bacon’s work. The complexity of

concepts surrounding Bacon's work is premised on the chasm of structural power subversions and reiterations. Through the manipulation and domination of the painting medium itself, Bacon inevitably finds himself participating in a power relationship while simultaneously subverting it through the themes inherent within his work. Transcendence functions in a transcategorical Aristotelian sense of the word through Bacon's own unique relationship with language and the transcendental. Bacon overturns many of the structures he cites through his expression of the contradiction inherent in the ontological "being" of the structure.

Velazquez and Bacon

In examining Velazquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, 1650, and his subject who is the predecessor to Bacon's pope, the viewer is presented with a severe and realistic Baroque style of portraiture depicting Retrato de Inocencio X, also known as Innocent X. At the time, Velazquez served as court painter for Spain's Philip IV, and he created *Innocent X* during a voyage to Italy after an extensive delay due to the Pope's initial hesitation in agreeing to Velazquez's plan to paint his portrait.¹ Velazquez's depiction of Innocent X, who sits poised in the traditional three-quarter portraiture position, conveys a heavy tension through the Pope's somber gaze. The strain is further amplified by the presence of a looming shadow situated behind and adjacent to the Pope's chair. One hundred years later, the Irish-born figurative painter Francis Bacon appropriated the figure of Velazquez's self-assured, yet cross Pope in his *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X I* (1953), a series that included forty-five variations of *Pope Innocent X*. Bacon distorts the Pope figure through a visual reduction of both the Subject and the material of paint, subverting the powerful figure into a stripped cadaver that is dis-figured and frozen in

¹ Edward Henning, "A Painting by Francis Bacon," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 70, no. 9 (1983). 356.

fear. The unhinged jaw and silent scream appear as a “puncture” through the subject’s head, creating a gaping hole separated from the Pope’s facial features. This signifier of the “cavernous” expresses an anxiety that finds parallel in both Velazquez’s and Bacon’s *Innocent X* as the figures appear as a metaphor for Nietzsche’s metaphysical description of an enclosure “in the suffering glass case of human individuality.”² Conveying themes such as inner anguish and fearful anxiety, David Sylvester describes Bacon’s “images of lonely, frightened beings – often caged and thus unable to make contact with other beings – do appear to have certain Existentialist overtones.”³ In a nod to this reference, Bacon has spoken of this kind of interpretation of his work, explaining how humans “live through screens – through a screened existence. And I sometimes think when people say my work looks violent that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens.”³ Bacon’s treatment of the subject, containing both Velazquez’s Pope as well as Bacon’s own interpretation of *Innocent X*, transcends the feral cry and reiterates the gaping black knot of inner dejection and malevolence toward the self. Bacon regarded S.M. Eisenstein’s 1925 silent film *Battleship Potemkin* as a “catalyst” for his work and the influence can be seen in the treatment of *Innocent X*’s infinite scream.⁴ The particular influential scene in which the screaming nurse is filmed on the Odessa Steps, with a close-up of the shards of glass embedded within her right eye, had a profound impact on Bacon. Many of his works including *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (1950) bear the traces of Eisenstein’s image. However, Bacon’s own personal theological transgressions are equally influential as the avowed atheist and homosexual routinely strips the papacy and

² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Francis Golffing, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956). 70.

³ David Sylvester and Francis Bacon, “Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1962-1979” (New and Enl. ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980). 87.

⁴ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996). 36.

transmogrifies the church through his frequent use of imagery that can be described as vertical and agitated “clawings” of paint. In this way, the painting medium itself functions twofold as, foremost, a visual vocabulary through the physical media of oil paint and secondly, as a Foucaultian technology of the self as a mode of critique for dismantling the power relations invoked by Bacon’s Pope Subject.

The Technology of Paint⁵

Analyzing Bacon’s *Innocent X* through the dual function of painting media exposes how interpretation occurs through what is “seen” in relation to what is “known” as confined within the technical and technological mechanics of the paint itself. A technical awareness of the painting material’s engagement with the body can conversely be seen as the material “becoming” of the body. The use of the term *technology* in this context works both within and beyond the material artifact, functioning to expose how power relations operate. Utilizing the term in a Foucaultian manner, technology reinforces this split understanding of the painting medium. In a metaphysical fashion, the various applications and manipulations of the media can be seen as fluidly interacting within the power structure, employing its use with a variety of applications that are subject to the needs and/or desires of its consequential output. Bacon clarified this form of application in a 1971 interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), explaining the way in which the bypass of perception brings the painting, “up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly.”⁶ In this way, the Subject is created through the manipulation, creation and transformation of the material, and Bacon’s use of the media determines how

⁵ While this paper includes only a brief reflection on the technology of paint and understandings of materialism, this concept will be explored in fuller context at a later date.

⁶ David Sylvester, "Francis Bacon at the BBC." *Francis Bacon: The Artist Discusses His Paintings and Influences*. BBC (1971).

individual conduct is always seen as functioning within a structure of power. Through either reiteration or subversion, the subject is presented as a consequence of certain objectifications within this structure. Objectification, as used here, functions outside of the Kantian sense of the word that implies the removal of dignity. Rather, objectification is used in conjunction with the S/subject's role as an object in a power structure. Through this, all individuals remain entirely and continually open to objectification since doing so reiterates their role, or their being, within the structure. These ideas concerning the manipulation and consequential domination of the individual and their conduct was highlighted in Marx's *Capital* (1867) wherein the technical aspects of capitalist production are achieved through the manipulation of use-value and the ways in which labor-power modifies the subjects' conduct. To this, Marx notes that, "as it is physically impossible to exploit the same individual...an alteration becomes necessary" and may be "effected in various ways."⁷ The split understanding of the technical and the technology of painting encompasses not only the Subject's relationship with the subject and the aforementioned medium, but their role within the structure of power and flux of supposed truth(s).

Truth Flux

This "truth flux," or variable wormhole in which the cultural "origins," languages and codes are defined, is one that operates hierarchically. Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* speculated that these constructions of truth emerge from the suppression, or subjugation of knowledge, or class oppression. In his study of subjugation in relation to structures of power, Foucault examines the intermediaries, or, "regimes of truth" that are reinforced between the subject and the Subject in order to eliminate the binary, or "...the setting up of a neutral

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital; a Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 172.

institution standing between the people and its enemies, establishing the diving line between the true and the false.”⁷ This power, however, is “everywhere and comes from everywhere” and is thus a far more dispersed and socially pervasive than power wielded by individuals or factions. The ideology of truth therefore “always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth.”⁸ Power then can be seen as being created through familiar forms of “knowledge” and “truth.” This truth regularly flexes its power through each society’s governing politics and principles, or, that which is made to function as “true” in relation to that which is “false.” Subversions of these truths as seen within Bacon’s *Innocent X* function simultaneously as both a reinterpretation of what these truths constitute as well as a subversion of the existing structure.

Bacon describes his artistic method as a “pulverizing machine,” considered by Rina Arya as “an apt metaphor for his predilection to strip the human being down to its bare essentials of flesh and blood.”⁹ The reinvention of fact and the communication of the resulting truths becomes a process of reiteration that is temporally bound to a specific point of time. The case in point is the transformation of truth through Bacon’s re-appropriation of Velazquez’s *Innocent X*, initially painted by Velazquez at the height of the Counter-Reformation, along with his subversion of the papal power of the Pope. Looking again at the formal properties of Bacon’s work, *Innocent X*’s scream echoes the subversion of the Pope himself but signifies his detachment from power. Arya supports my argument when she suggests that Bacon “subsequently invalidates the accompanying symbols of authority within the painting, such as the papal robes and other

⁸ Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). 2-138.

⁹ Rina Arya, "Remaking the Body: The Cultural Dimensions of Francis Bacon," *Journal for Cultural Research*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (2009). 144-145.

articles.”⁹ Alongside the more direct analysis of the symbolism inherent in his portrayal of the Pope, Bacon’s assertion of a veiled existence emulates his confinement within the papal structure, even in its multilayered dimensions.

Cultural ‘Truths’ and Language Fetish

The construction of both meaning and knowledge paired with the instability of absolute truth can be traced through a genealogical inquiry of the origin of contemporary and traditional beliefs. But to avoid the glorification of origins, there is a need to distinguish “between the historical quest for the origin as a foundation of belief and the genealogical questioning of the origin as a moment of critique,” as articulated by Alan Schrift.¹⁰ Through a genealogical analysis modeled from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Critique of Oppositional Thinking*, Schrift suggests there is a psychological component to the philosopher’s foundational inquiry by which a “genealogical analysis seeks not only the origins of modern values but also the reasons and justifications which the proponents of these values have given in asserting their hegemony.”¹¹ The point of surfacing these subterranean qualities is to find the origins of contemporary cultural thought and the value of those beliefs. This revelation involves breaking apart hierarchal structures. The dissection of these structures functions in a two-fold manner. The first, as explained by Schrift, is the evacuation of a “traditionally privileged relation” while the latter “seeks to displace the opposition [to these privileged relations] altogether by showing it to be the result of a prior value imposition that itself requires critique.”¹²

¹⁰ Alan D. Schrift, “Nietzsche and the Critique of Oppositional Thinking,” *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (1989), 783-784.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 786.

In viewing the origin of the structure(s), or, the central structurality of the structure itself, as coined by Derrida, a core weight or origin would presumably be in play. “From then on,” Derrida states, “it became necessary to think the law which governed, as it were, the desire for the center in the constitution of structure...prescribing its displacements and its substitutions for this law of the central presence.”¹³ However, even this idea succumbs to the cycled trap of metaphysics. Or, that from which we attack the structure is a derivative of the structure itself. There is no alien counter to it. “It describes the form of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. *There is no sense* in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics.”¹⁴ The hierarchy and meaning ascribed to language itself, be it within the “text” of Bacon’s work or beyond, remains an unavoidable and prevalent ambiguity. A central locus that was never once central nor natural, revealing itself as an arbitrary discourse. Supported by this argument, I am asserting that the language of paint – the technology of painting – has long expressed another form of discursive meaning. Based on my reading of Derrida’s metaphorical dimension of the interweave of language and experienced/perceived knowledge the complexity of Bacon’s work is comparable to the “fabric” of the construction of truth and its “intercomplication is such that the warp cannot be distinguished.”¹⁵ Not unlike Bacon’s expression through the technology of painting, Derrida argues for the untangling of language or words since they must be continually stretched, reshaped and re-understood in order to prevent from etymological stagnation and the perverse fetishization of language.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 2

¹⁴ Ibid. 278.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53.

Theological Transgressions

Bacon's inquisitions focus on faith and his painting subject's relationship within the philosophical and political structure. In this way, Bacon's work can be deconstructed (in the broader sense of the word, since an examination of both painting and theology fluctuates between construction and unconstructability) and reconstructed to view more concisely the theological vernacular active within his work. The internal mechanisms of the words themselves that constitute the philosophical and political structure remain questionable as the theological continues to function within its own structure.

Bacon denies that he intended to create "blasphemous" imagery or subject-matter that is religiously subversive, and instead, he insists that he is "focusing on a feeling of suffering and the ferocity of life itself."¹⁶ When questioned about the significance of his use of overtly religious imagery, Bacon comments that he held no belief of any kind but was interested "about behavior and about the way life is." He later went on to note that many of his paintings came "almost nearer to a self-portrait." The implications that arise from this statement are far-reaching and highly suggestive of Bacon's own experiences with abuse and suffering as a consequence of his homosexuality. Because of this, Bacon could clearly and definitively express his perspective on the human condition only through the overt and violent dismantling of Christian imagery with its symbolic complexity of abandonment, sin and betrayal. Religion, or religiousness, therefore takes on a generalized summation of the nature of religion through an assessment of its fundamental duplicity. Bacon's subversion of authority in *Innocent X* can be seen as applicable to the papal imagery, but overall, he is reconsidering any religious implications in the work.

¹⁶ David Sylvester and Francis Bacon, "Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1962-1979" (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980). 89.

Nietzsche's famous declaration "God is dead" is highly relevant here in that "the pure concept, or infinity, as the abyss of nothingness in which all being sinks, must characterize the infinite pain, which previously was only in culture historically and as the feeling on which rests modern religion, the feeling that God Himself is dead."¹⁶

¹⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 108.